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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that teacher quality is the single most important factor in determining student achievement and that the impact of a teacher is cumulative. Students with less exposure to qualified teachers are far less likely to achieve academic success than students with more exposure. Research also shows that teachers majoring in the subject areas taught have a more positive impact on student achievement than teachers majoring in out-of-field disciplines. Yet teacher certification in many states does not require subject area expertise. Some states and universities have seriously begun examining this issue, exploring initiatives to align student academic content standards with teacher licensure and involving liberal arts faculty in developing teacher training curricula. The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) is committed to improving teacher quality by promoting public awareness of scientifically based teacher quality strategies and market-based initiatives and encouraging reforms that lead to measurable gains in student achievement. NCTQ's efforts to fulfill its mission include: publishing materials that address teacher quality issues, maintaining an online teacher quality information clearinghouse, and helping states, districts, and colleges improve teacher quality. It is also working to develop a national teacher certification board, the American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence. (Contains 11 references.) (SM)

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By

Thomas Suh and Raechelle Fore

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The National Council on Teacher Quality: Expanding the Teacher Quality Discussion

Thomas Suh and Raechelle Fore

The Current Landscape

What does the future bode for America's schoolchildren? Recent results of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) – the Nation's Report Card – indicate improved student performance in both math and reading. These statistical gains, however, are modest, and when viewed in the context of actual learning, are not so promising. The average eighth-grader cannot calculate the amount of change from a purchase (Braswell, Lutkus, Grigg, Santapau, Tay-Lim, & Johnson, 2000), and indications are that s/he will not be able to do so for another six years. In reading, nearly 40 percent of fourth-graders remain unable to read at even a basic level – a level defined as "prerequisite" for reading proficiently (Donahue, Finnegan, Lutkus, Allen, & Campbell, 2001).

Results in the international arena are even more discouraging. In the 1995 Third International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) involving twenty-six nations including the United States, American fourth-graders placed twelfth in mathematics, and a respectable third in science (Calsyn, Gonzales, & Frase, 1999). When TIMSS was re-administered four years later to eighth-graders in thirty-eight countries, American students had lost ground, slipping to nineteenth in mathematics and eighteenth in science (Gonzales, Calsyn, Jocelyn, Mak, Kastberg, Arafeh, Williams, & Tsen, 2001).

Why such poor performances? One explanation is the predominance of teachers not qualified to teach. Research tells us that the influence of teachers is the single-most important factor in determining student achievement, even more so than socioeconomic status (Sanders & Rivers, 1996; Collias, Pajak, & Rigden, 2000), which for years was deemed as having the highest correlation to academic success (Coleman, 1966). Studies also indicate that the impact of a teacher (for good or for bad) is cumulative, having a lasting, measurable effect on academic performance (Sanders & Rivers, 1996), and accounting for the discrepancy between "gifted" and "remedial" (Haycock, 1998). Students with less exposure to qualified teachers, therefore, seem far less likely of achieving academic success than those with more. Given the recurrence of disappointing results on student learning assessments at the national and international levels, too many of America's students do not appear to be receiving enough exposure to qualified teachers.

Certified Teachers v. Qualified Teachers

Poor student performance on NAEP, TIMSS, and other standardized measures of student learning raises questions about teacher quality and the effectiveness of teacher certification. For years, states relied on certification to ensure teacher preparation quality, despite the lack of any compelling evidence justifying the selection of the certification requirements. With the push to assess student learning, especially since the 1983 release of A Nation at Risk, we now have data suggesting that state certification has not fulfilled its gatekeeping role. Research tells us that teachers who major in the subject-area taught have a more positive impact on student achievement than teachers majoring in an out-of-field discipline, including those who major in education (Goldhaber & Brewer, 1999). Yet, teacher certification in many states does not require subject-area expertise. According to data published in 2001 by the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC), less than a third of all states require an academic major in the subject to be taught, and only two-thirds require teacher candidates to pass a subject-matter exam for initial licensure. Given the failure of states to ensure subject-area competence, it is questionable whether state certification is able to guarantee whether a certified teacher is necessarily a qualified teacher.

While teacher educators are largely unconvinced of the correlation between teacher subject-area preparation and student academic achievement (Collias, Pajak, & Rigden, 2000), it is more widely accepted in other circles. Leading education groups such as the Education Trust, the Education Leaders Council, and the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, characterized by their diversity as much as by their commitment, have repeatedly acknowledged the importance of the link between teacher subject-area preparation and student learning. The federal government has also expressed its desire to strengthen teacher preparation. Amidst a great deal of controversy, the President of the United States signed into law the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), which stipulates, among other things, that Title I schools hire only highly-qualified teachers[1] beginning in the fall of 2002, and that there be a highly-qualified teacher in every classroom by the end of the 2005-06 school year. To be deemed "highly-qualified," a new teacher must be able to demonstrate "rigorous subject-matter preparation . . . either through adequate performance on a test or through successful completion of a major, graduate degree, or advanced credentialing" (Paige, 2002). Veteran teachers are required to hold at least a bachelor's degree and demonstrate subject-matter competence through less formal, but no less demanding, requirements (see NCLB, Title IX, Part A, Section 9101 (23)(C)).

Though opinions may differ in coming years over the benefits of NCLB, one indisputable accomplishment stands: the framing of the teacher preparation issue in terms of teacher quality – not teacher certification. Based on studies that examine individual student learning, we know that the quality of a student's teacher is the single-most important factor in a student's education. Improving teacher preparation may, therefore, require going beyond the realm of current state certification, and focusing on actual student understanding and achievement needs. Some states and universities have seriously begun dealing with this issue, exploring initiatives to align student academic content standards with teacher licensure, for example, and involving liberal arts faculty in the development of the teacher training curriculum. While a number of education schools "do not consider content knowledge their responsibility" (Cross & Rigden, 2002), this attitude is changing, albeit slowly.

Mission and Activities

The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) is committed to improving teacher quality by promoting public awareness of scientifically-based teacher quality strategies

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[1] The law specifies that teachers must be "highly-qualified" in the core subject areas of English, reading or language arts, mathematics, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts, history, and geography (see NCLB, Title IX, Part A, Section 9101 (11)).

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and market-based initiatives, and encouraging reforms that lead to measurable gains in student achievement. NCTQ is a 501(c)(3) non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to the belief that America's public education can be improved through better teaching. NCTQ originated as the Teacher Quality Initiative, a joint project of the Education Leaders Council and the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, but has since emerged as an independent voice in the public conversation concerning teacher quality.

NCTQ's efforts to fulfill its mission can be categorized as three distinct activities: publishing materials that address teacher quality issues, maintaining an online teacher quality information clearinghouse, and assisting states, school districts, and colleges to improve teacher quality. In addition to these core activities, NCTQ is involved in a project to develop a national teacher certification – American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence – that will recognize strong subject-area knowledge, and encourage the use of documentable student learning gains to measure teacher effectiveness.

Publishing

The Teacher Quality Bulletin (TQB) is an online newsletter published by NCTQ for the purpose of fostering public understanding of teacher quality issues. Each issue provides analyses of the current news, studies, and reports concerned with such important topics as teacher compensation strategies, alternative routes to certification, teacher retention, and teacher preparation reform. TQB is currently published biweekly and available free of charge.

From time to time, NCTQ also publishes briefing reports, memos, and other material that offer a more in depth treatment of key teacher quality policies, issues, and programs. Last year, it published a detailed analysis of the then-proposed Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) reauthorization. NCTQ will also release, "A Consumer's Guide to Teacher Quality: Opportunity and Challenge in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001," and another publication, "Moving Towards Excellence: Exemplary Teacher Preparation Programs."

Online Information Clearinghouse

NCTQ believes that the condition of American public education should be transparent to the American public. As a result, NCTQ has developed an online information clearinghouse that people may access via the Worldwide Web. Plans are being considered to expand the clearinghouse to include an archive of the latest teacher quality research.

Consulting

In addition to promoting public awareness of teacher quality issues, NCTQ provides technical assistance to states, school districts, and institutions of higher learning committed to improving teacher quality. NCTQ makes available a wide variety of services ranging from legislative and standards analysis to program development and evaluation.

American Board Certification

The American Board for Certification of Teacher Excellence (ABCTE) represents a new approach to teacher certification. There are two levels of certification – Passport and Master Teacher – both of which provide superintendents and principals with a reliable measure of assurance that the holder (regardless of geographical origin) is competent in his or her subject-area.

Passport certification, which is designed for licensing prospective teachers whether right out of college or after having spent years at another career, also recognizes that the holder has a fundamental understanding of effective instructional and assessment strategies, including basic classroom management. Master Teacher certification, which is designed for the veteran teacher, carries the added distinction of recognizing teacher effectiveness as measured by documented success in bolstering student achievement. Like the Passport, Master Teacher certification will be nationally-recognized, allowing teachers to have their certification recognized in other states.

In addition, a series of studies will be conducted to examine the predictive validity of both certification programs, and an online preparation program for taking the certifying exams developed.

Conclusion

Current research suggests what most people have long-known — the key to student success in the classroom is the teacher. The process for preparing teachers, however, is largely based on requirements that have little relevance to improving student learning. Until the teaching community is willing to align teacher preparation with student achievement, we will be unable to offer each student the education s/he deserves.

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References identified with an EJ or ED number have been abstracted and are in the ERIC database. Journal articles (EJ) should be available at most research libraries; most documents (ED) are available in microfiche collections at more than 900 locations. Documents can also be ordered through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service: (800) 443-ERIC.

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